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SCHOOLS

Winchester High chemistry teacher Gina Zhou finalist in Presidential Awards

NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY | STAFF WRITER

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Winchester High School chemistry teacher Gina Zhou is one of two math/science teachers to represent Massachusetts at the national Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

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It's the last day for Winchester High School seniors and they cro
Gina Zhou's classroom, seeking photos and asking her to sign yearbooks.

She happily does so, doling out praise, offering advice, joking around and sending them off with hugs and promises to check in with her from time to time as they go about their new lives in college.

They, in turn, tell her they love her, that they will miss her terribly and she was the best teacher they ever had.

It seems like just another year of saying farewells to graduating students — except that today is a special day for Zhou. She's just been honored by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) as one of two finalists who will represent the state at the national Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching (PAEMST).

The awards are the highest honors bestowed by the U.S. specifically for K-12 science, technology, engineering, mathematics and/or computer science teaching.

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Winchester Public Schools Director of Science K-12 Ann Ritchie, left, chemistry teacher Gina Zhou, with DESE representatives Corrine Steever, innovative assessment project manager, and Casandra Gonzalez, science content support specialist and PAEMST MA science coordinator, at the May 30 ceremony at WHS.
WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

On May 30, representatives from DESE popped into WHS to recognize Zhou during a ceremony held in her classroom. Dozens of students and fellow teachers turned out, offering congratulations and well wishes.

“I know what a high bar it is so I was so proud,” said Ann Ritchie, director of science for grades 6 to 12. “My thoughts were that this is such an appropriate teacher to give it to.”

Ritchie decided to throw the party for Zhou. She said back in April, she reached out to students and asked if they’d be interested in attending the ceremony. She also asked them to come up with one word that would describe Zhou.

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“Virtually everyone responded,” she said. “They wanted to come.”

A lanyard with one word tags, each representing the one-word descriptions of Gina Zhou given by her students. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

During the ceremony, Ritchie gave Zhou a special gift — a lanyard with one word tags, each representing the descriptions of her given by students. Ritchie said a student actually designed each tag especially for Zhou.

Ritchie said it's important to celebrate the good things being done in the schools by faculty.

"Teaching can be such a grind," she said. "When you get to September, you are off and running and there's a lot to get done."

New classes, new students, new ideas to try out. Ritchie said when summer comes, some teachers like Zhou continue to work.

"That's why we have to take these moments of celebration," Ritch
"I'm just overjoyed to hear students say that there's no one better to receive

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this award. It's an experience for them, too. In fact, it's an award for the whole community."

The award

DESE representatives Casandra Gonzalez, science content support specialist and PAEMST MA science coordinator, and Corrine Steever, innovative assessment project manager, made their final stop in Winchester on May 30.

Winchester Public Schools Director of Science K-12 Ann Ritchie speaks to students and other attendees of an awards ceremony for Gina Zhou on May 30. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

The duo have been all over the state, informing about 20 or so other finalists in different subjects. Gonzalez said it's great to see schools coming out to celebrate their teachers.

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"I'd say the last few years, we've seen things amp up at the school sites," she said. "Whether or not these teachers win at the national level, we think of all these teachers as champions."

Steever added they've already won at the state level.

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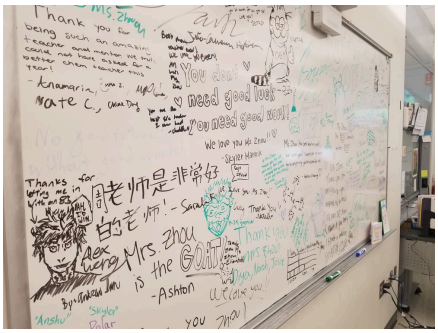
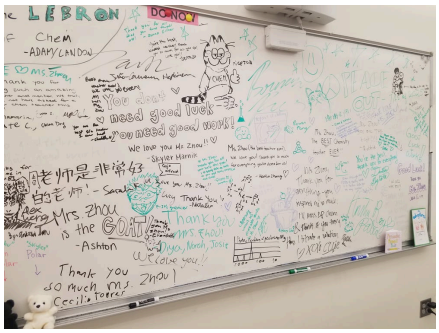
And it's a difficult process.

Gonzalez said teachers are either nominated by someone else or can self-nominate. There's a long application process that includes a video, recommendations, and a deep dive into their subjects. The process takes from September through February.

A panel of educational experts and past winners meet in February. In March, the state-level winners are announced.





A white board full of student comments and a food display on May 30. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTOS/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

The National Science Foundation administers the national awards, which have representatives from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the Department of Defense Education Activity schools and every U.S. territory.

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The winners receive a $10,000 prize and a visit to the White House, where they meet the president, and later tour Washington D.C.

During her presentation, Gonzalez said the awards are all about celebrating the excellence of teachers.

“The award recognizes those teachers that have both deep content knowledge of the subjects they teach and who also have the ability to motivate and enable students to be successful in those areas,” she said. “In order to qualify for the award, teachers must demonstrate a commitment to practice and must show leadership inside and outside of their community.”

Students start to gather in the classroom of chemistry teacher Gina Zhou for a special awards ceremony in her honor as a state-level winner of a national award. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

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Number one fans

There's no doubt in the minds of students just who should be a national-level awardee.

"She should win," said sophomore Charlotte Bermidor-O'Donnell, of Zhou. "She's an aggressive teacher, but she has made me feel comfortable with asking questions in class. She's never made me feel bad about myself and she's made [chemistry] fun, more engaging."

Fellow sophomore Sophia Barbosa couldn't wait to extoll Zhou's virtues.

"The minute I walked into her class, I knew I was going to have a good year," Barbosa said. "I heard chemistry was a hard class, and I'm not saying it's been super easy, but she makes the hard stuff not seem so threatening. She really knows how to teach."

But it's more than that, Barbosa said, adding Zhou has taught her to be in control when taking tests or tackling a tough subject.

"I have found such joy in learning everything I have in this class," she said.

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Charlotte Bermidor-O'Donnell, Sophia Barbosa, Defne Mergen, Amelia Holmes, Mariel Nagler, Sierra Scott, Alysa Zhang and Eloise Woelk with chemistry teacher Gina Zhou. The group says they are Zhou's number one fans. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

Defne Mergen, Amelia Holmes, Mariel Nagler, Sierra Scott, Alysa Zhang and Eloise Woelk gather and praise their teacher, her organizational skills, how she always has labs and other materials graded the next day, her enthusiasm for her students...and on it goes.

"We are her number one fans!" they cheer.

It's not news to Charlotte Gately, a senior who took AP chemistry with Zhou and is her teaching assistant in her honors chemistry class.

"She is so deserving of this award," Gately said. "She is an amazing teacher. She's always helping her students. She's done an awesome job and I'm so proud of her."

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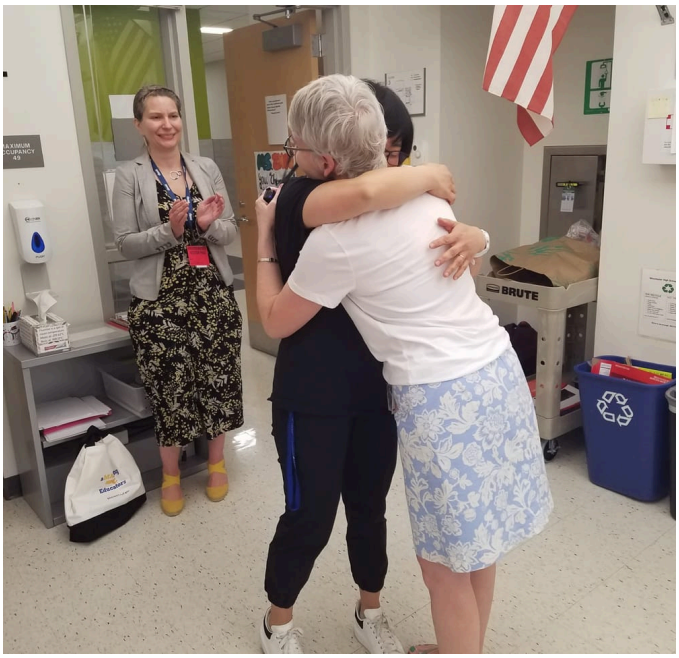
What does Zhou say?

It might surprise some to hear that Zhou nominated herself for this award. During the ceremony, she explained that the application experience gave her a real opportunity to examine how she teaches, her knowledge of what she teaches and all the other criteria required to qualify.

“I did it for my students, I really did,” she said. “I want to be the teacher that I wished I had in high school. That’s why I do it.”



Winchester Public Schools Director of Science K-12 Ann Ritchie congratulates chemistry teacher Gina Zhou on winning a spot at the state level of the Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTOS/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

As the day winds up, everyone has come and gone, but students still hang out in Zhou’s classroom. And Zhou is still smiling.

“I did not expect such a turnout,” she said, of celebration. “I kept telling Ann [Ritchie] how nervous I was to get up there.”

Zhou said she almost didn’t make it to the celebration. She said w
had a meet and greet with the folks at DESE and other applicants,

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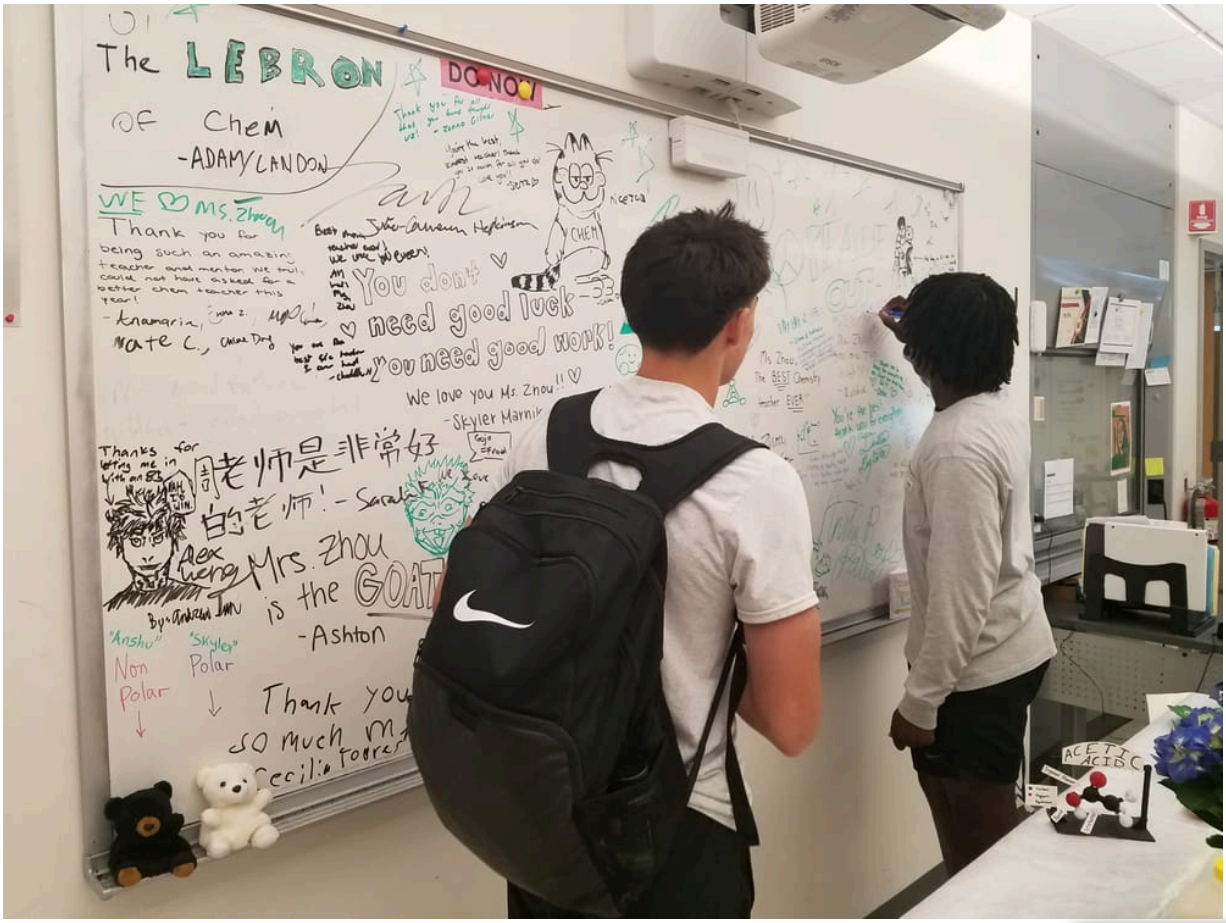
her to re-think her application, one she'd spent more than 100 hours filling out.

All the other candidates, Zhou said, were just so qualified and had amazing resumes.

"I told my mentor I should withdraw and do it again in two years," she said. "I felt like I just wasn't qualified yet. She said I'd worked so hard and to just give it a try. I could always use the feedback for later."

But she won!

"I was very surprised," she said, when the email rolled in around May to tell her she was a state-level winner. "I was also very excited."


The LEBRON
DO NOT
of Chem
-ADAM LANDON
WE Ms. Zhou
Thank you for being such an amazing teacher and mentor we truly could not have asked for a better chem teacher this year!
You don't need good luck
You need good work!
We love you Ms. Zhou!!
-Skyler Marnik
Mrs. Zhou is the GOAT
-Ashton
Alex Wang
"Anshu" Non Polar
"Skyler" Polar

Students write their well wishes to teacher Gina Zhou on the whiteboard in her classroom. WIN NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

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Now, Zhou will write an addendum to her application based on the feedback from the state panel for the national awards. It's more work she said she will gladly take on.

What does Zhou think her chances are at the national level?

"I really don't know," she said. "I met them, but we didn't really talk. We will have an opportunity next week to casually meet. These folks are all amazing."

But, Zhou said, it's not really about the award. Just like she said earlier. It's about the kids.

"I am lucky to have such a group of kids who are motivated and so sweet," she said, with a smile. "I know how hard it is to be a teenager. I would say that teaching chemistry is my job, but I really try to help the kids understand the struggle in high school is real. But I can be here for them."

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Winchester High School club hopes art contest will foster interest in Black history, culture

When then-freshman Christie Clark approached Carson Sarpong about becoming a co-founder for her club, Black Student Union, he was hesitant. Three years later, Sarpong is the president, and the club has organized the Black History Project, a contest that invites students to create art about Black history and culture. The

TAVISHI CHATTOPADHYAY | CORRESPONDENT
February 5, 2026

SCHOOLS

Winchester High School's speech and debate team sees a meteoric rise

Winchester's speech and debate team, like most things, began with only a handful of students competing in its inaugural year and receiving little attention from the school. Yet now, what began as a modest club for fun, has grown into something significant and respected by the entire Massachusetts debate

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January 30, 2026

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Winchester High School Athletic Department reschedules open house for 8th graders

The following was submitted by the Winchester High School Athletics

EVENTS

Winchester High School Black Student Union launches 'Black History Project' cont community showcase

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Department: On Monday, Feb. 2, the Winchester High School Athletics Department will be hosting its rescheduled open house night for 8th graders from 6:30-8:30 p.m. in the auditorium. Come to an informational meeting, meet the coaches, learn

January 27, 2026

The following was submitted by the Black Student Union at Winchester High School: The Black Student Union (BSU) at Winchester High School (WHS) is proud to announce the launch of the Black History Project, a contest designed to foster education, research, and creative expression surrounding Black history and culture. The

January 14, 2026

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Winchester School Committee candidates bring contrasting backgrounds to Thursday forum

Two candidates for Winchester's School Committee will face voters at a forum as the district navigates a new literacy curriculum, budget pressures and questions about student mental health. Heather von Mering and John Bellaire are competing for an open seat on the School Committee, which oversees a budget von

WILL DOWD | STAFF WRITER

March 4, 2026

FEATURES

'Chicago: Teen Edition' dances onto the Winchester High School stage

By Talia Ho | Correspondent Fame. Fortune. And all that jazz. This spring, Winchester High School presents "Chicago: Teen Edition," a bold musical that explores celebrity culture, media manipulation, and the cost of ambition. Set in the 1920s, this iconic production is sure to leave the audience wanting more. Performances will

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

March 4, 2026

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EVENTS

Ripley Chapel in Winchester presents ‘Syldason: You Are Welcome Here’

The following was submitted by the Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church: On Friday, March 13, beginning at 7:30 p.m., live in-person and live streamed from the stunning Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church, Winchester, 21 Church St., join in with Syldason, a duo concert featuring Sylvie Zakarian,

March 4, 2026

NEWS

Rep. Michael Day helps House colleagues pass sweeping energy affordability bill

The following was submitted by the Office of Rep. Michael S. Day: Rep. Michael S. Day and his colleagues in the House of Representatives recently passed energy affordability legislation that would result in over $9 billion in savings for utility ratepayers over the next 10 years. The bill maintains critical

March 4, 2026

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